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THE PROGRESS OF SCIENCE

CURRENT COMMENT

By DR. EDWIN E. SLOSSON
Science Service

EVOLUTION WORKING BACKWARD

ONCE farmers planted the nubbins of their corn and the potatoes that were too small to sell. Now they know better. They cut up their finest potatoes to plant, and every grain of their seed corn is pedigreed as carefully as a Colonial Dame. The result is seen in the doubled yield in potatoes richer in starch and corn richer in protein. Modern agriculture is fertilized by science.

The most backward branch of biology is the infant science of sociology. It is only just beginning to get its eyes open, to see things; in time, perhaps it will be able to do things, like the older sciences. But there is need of haste. The age of instinct is passing, the reign of reason has not come. Man has been pushed up to his present position. He has succeeded in slackening the pressure. Will he go forward rationally, of his own free will, or sink back until again he falls under the sway of the blind and merciless forces of the struggle for existence?

A decrease in the birth rate is not necessarily a misfortune to a country. Very likely, for instance, the British Isles have now all the population they can support in comfort under present economic conditions. The alarming thing about it is that the breeding is from the poorest stock instead of the best. Whatever objective standard one may take this is true. A statistical study of the population of Great Britain showed that in the districts where there was the most overcrowding, the cheapest type of labor, the lowest degree of culture and edu-

cation, the highest percentage of pauperism and lunacy, the greatest criminality and the highest death rate from tuberculosis and infantile diseases, there the number of children was greatest in proportion to the possibly productive wives. It is a clear case of the survival of the unfittest, the reversal of evolution. No race can maintain its efficiency and virility against such reactive forces.

The future of a country depends ultimately upon the character and ability of its people. Increase of wealth, advance of science, improvement in education, discoveries in sanitation, juster social conditions, all the achievements and hopes of the present age will be of little benefit to posterity if there is a decline in the native quality of the race. It would be disastrous to hand over a more perfect and complicated governmental machine to inferior engineers. One seventh of the present generation will be the parents of one half of the next. Therefore, two generations of selection, natural or designed, would completely transform the character of a nation. Is this seventh composed of the best men and women that we have?

This is what is going to determine whether civilization shall advance or retrograde. Galton's ideal of eugenics may be too much in advance of the age to be practical, but at least something could be done to awaken the people to the imminent dangers of dysgenics.

ATOMS OF LIGHT

THE discovery of the X-rays in 1895 acted like the discovery of gold in an unexplored country. It opened the way to the exploration of a field of unsuspected wealth of new knowledge and to the radical reconstruc-